

Kamp Kahlert

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Revamped Camp keeps emphasis on peace, quiet

B4 THURSDAY DEC. 5.1996 South County News tip? South County reporter Mary Allen can be reached at 280-5935

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When an area church conference bought the West River Center 45 years ago, it was a rustic summer camp with a burned-out kitchen and no screens on the cabin windows. Today, the landmark is known as a camp, retreat and conference center that draws more than 15,000 visitors each year. But the center has managed to maintain its sought-after solitude, despite a boom in West River home building. "It's a really renewing experience for folks," center Director Andy Thornton said. "Just the opportunity to get apart from your daily routine has tremendous value for re-energizing." The Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church manages the 45-acre parcel, which includes a mile of waterfront. It paid \$60,000 for the property in 1951; the center will celebrate its 45th anniversary with a dinner on Saturday. Once known as Kamp Kahlert, the camp was a YWCA outfit with more buildings than the 15 on site now. The center was first known as TneTVieinoaisi Church Camp, run by the Rev. Thomas B. Ehlers. His daughter, Galesville resident Dotty Harvey, was an assistant director for eight years, and today works as a volunteer, including a stint last summer as counselor to the fishing camp. "They're amazed by this openness that includes both the greenery and the water," she said of visitors. The facility maintains an ambitious schedule that benefits people of many denominations. There are nine separate weeks of summer camp available to children, with Capital graphic themes ranging from music to sailing to camp for deaf youth. With room to sleep 210, it is a place that draws everything from weekend quilting retreats to family reunions to day visits from county school groups. It also is a meeting place for organizations like the Boy Scouts and the West River Estates Homeowners Association. It is opened to the public on summer Sundays, and the facility has a nature center and three hiking' trails used primarily by campers. "Mr. Thornton said a turning point came in 1981 with the construction of a winterized retreat building, which made the facility available year-round. Since then, the old cabins have been demolished to make way for new models. Meanwhile, developers have been building homes



around the camp for years. That hasn't affected the ambiance of the center, though, Mr. Thornton said.